

## Road Warrior: Bicyclists want bigger slice of the asphalt pie

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It seemed like a good idea back in 2009 when bicycling groups asked the Legislature for a law offering them more room as they maneuvered around trucks, SUVs and muscle cars. After all, road fatalities had claimed 20 cyclists the preceding year, one of the deadliest 12-month periods for New Jerseyans who often trade in horsepower for pedal power.

Wouldn't most of these tragedies and hundreds of serious injuries be avoided if steel-encased motorists were required to slow down, move over or use an extra measure of caution as they passed slower-moving, unbuckled riders balanced atop two skinny wheels? It's a good question to ask as 950,000 New Jerseyans hit the road for the Memorial Day weekend that launches the summer driving period, when heavy traffic reaches its peak.

Bicycling is a big part of that traffic. A Harvard University study released last year showed annual bike trips in the United States leapt from 1.7 billion in 2001, to 4 billion in 2009.

"We didn't think we were asking the Legislature for much," said Cyndi Steiner, executive director of the New Jersey Bike and Walk Coalition.

Just 3 feet.

As cyclists saw it, a reasonable measure of safety could be achieved if drivers gave them 3 feet of clearance as they passed. At the time, several other states had adopted similar share-the-road laws.

The Legislature didn't buy it, however. Nor did police. A similar move-over law required cars to give one full lane of clearance when passing emergency vehicles on highways, partly because high-profile collisions had killed police and other emergency workers as they took care of crash victims on the side of the road.

But bicycle crashes didn't generate much political traction, though they accounted for nearly 2,600 collisions annually over 10 years ended 2012, according to a study conducted by the Tri-State Transportation Campaign. Among all categories tracked under federal guidelines, bike fatalities in New Jersey remained lowest: 15 deaths a year over five years to 2014, less than 7 percent of total road deaths.

Overall, however, road fatalities were declining, except for one category: Pedestrian deaths held firm.

Teaming with Tri-State and AAA, the Bike and Walk Coalition hit upon a new strategy: Last year, its leaders suggested a share-the-road bill that would require drivers to offer clearance to pedestrians as well as bicyclists. At roughly the same time, the League of American Bicyclists kicked New Jersey out of its Top 10 ranking of bike-friendly states. Instead of No. 7, the state

was rated 12th for two reasons: its 2,600 annual bike crashes and its failure to pass a share-the-road bill.

Last May, the state Assembly responded by passing a measure that would make New Jersey the 33rd state to require drivers to give clearance to bicyclists and pedestrians — at 4 feet, not 3. If enacted, this law would be one of the strongest share-the-road restrictions in the nation.

"Four feet is appropriate," Steiner explained, "because it's the width of a bike lane."

Its chances of passage in the state Senate, however, are slim. Nicholas Sacco, D-North Bergen, who heads the Senate Transportation Committee, refuses to post it for a hearing.

"Streets in the senator's district aren't wide enough to accommodate 4 feet," explained an aide, Philip Swibinski. "Drivers would be forced into oncoming traffic as they passed."

Steiner responded: "The senator's district is not unique. Other cities, including New York, have managed to adopt similar standards."

At 20,016 people per square mile, New York City is the nation's sixth-most-densely populated municipality. But Sacco's aide has a point.

Guttenberg, West New York and Edgewater in the senator's 32nd District rank among the 70 most densely populated — and, presumably, most highly trafficked — municipalities in the nation. Although its population barely exceeds 11,000, Guttenberg, at less than a fifth of a square mile, is so small that it statistically averages 58,821 residents per square mile. That makes it the nation's most densely populated town. West New York is third at 48,733 per square mile, and Edgewater is 67th at 12,312.

"I agree that we should give bicyclists some leeway," said Edgewater Police Chief William Skidmore. "But too many things can go wrong on our narrow streets to give them that much leeway."

"There's even a bill in the Legislature that would give clearance to garbage trucks," added Anthony Parente, executive director of the New Jersey Police Traffic Officers Association. "You have to draw the line."

Advocates have drawn up new language that suggests keeping a "reasonable and safe distance between the vehicle and the bicycle" until the vehicle has safely passed the bicycle. So far, though, Sacco hasn't responded to their suggestions.

Meanwhile, 60 pedestrians have been killed on New Jersey roads so far this year, including a woman struck on a Fort Lee street last week. Two bicyclists have died, too, including a 20-year-old on Midland Avenue in Paramus in March.

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